



"The belief in the possibility of a short, decisive war appears to be one of the most ancient and dangerous of human illusions."

—Robert Lynd

17-Sep-10

## Evil Is Real (Part Four)

In Part Three, we considered Jesus' discourse in Mark 7 about defilement originating within us. Of the evils He wants us to overcome, external ones actually appear far down the list, for we, being the weak of [the world](#), have little control over them. However, if we change what is inside, which we can control, our own external actions have a far better chance of being righteous. Vanquish the sins at their point of origin, and our deeds will be clean before [God](#).

Far from perfect and peaceful, then, our Christian lives are a running battle to overthrow the accumulated remnants of evil from our pre-conversion lives, as well as what sins we retain and commit from that time forward. As Paul phrases it in his discussion of [baptism](#) in Romans 6, "the old man" with all of his sins is "crucified with Christ," doing away with the body of [sin](#) that had accumulated over a lifetime of rebellion against God. Coming up from the water, we are raised to an entirely new life—we are a "new man," who is now challenged to increase in righteousness day by day ([Romans 6:11-14](#)), even "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" ([Ephesians 4:13](#)).

Despite experiencing God's forgiveness and being set on the right path, the evil nature that has grown within us for many years is not removed. It is not even fundamentally changed. It is still there, influencing our every decision, conscious or unconscious. This means that the fight between human nature and God's nature rages on (see [Galatians 5:16-17](#)). Many newly baptized church members are distressed about how soon they sin after baptism, and the reason is because God does not take away our evil nature. We must still engage it and overcome it.

What happens at baptism and the laying on of hands to receive the Holy Spirit is that we are forgiven of all the evil we practiced before accepting [Jesus Christ](#) as our Savior, and God gives us a measure of His Spirit to help us to transform into Christ's image. However, the poor habits, the bad attitudes, the wrong ideas, and all the ingrained behaviors that have built up over the years remain. The evils that we harbored and nurtured all the while we lived without the true knowledge of God linger on, and it becomes our Christian duty to put them down every day.

Many of us know [Jeremiah 17:9](#) by heart, since it is a basic reality of the human condition. Nevertheless, do we really believe what God says here? God is speaking in this passage, giving an evaluation of mankind. In verses 5-6, He relates that curses come upon those who trust in men, and in verses 7-8, He reveals that blessings accrue to those who trust in Him. Verse 9, though, is not focused on the blessed or the cursed but on everyone, humanity as a whole. It reads, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"

God means this! Do we believe it? From a human perspective, what He says cuts to the quick anyone with a hint of pride. No one thinks of himself as thoroughly evil; in fact, most of us believe we are pretty good. We grew up among other Christians. We think we did a fair job of keeping the commandments. We try to get along with almost everyone. Yet, God's words bring us up short. Are we fooling ourselves? Are we really making a sincere effort to live God's way? Are the things that we do merely a show? Do we act as we do to make people like us? Are we in reality only conforming to

peer-pressure? Do we do what we do for the right reasons? What condition are our hearts really in? God answers, "You can't know it. It is most desperately wicked and deceptive."

Further, whom does it deceive the most? Us! Upon acknowledging this revelation from God about ourselves, we have to ask, "Have my motives ever been good for doing anything?" Perhaps, since human nature is one of good and evil. However, God's answer in verse 10 is that only He really knows our real character—and thank God for that! We would despair to see ourselves as we really are, although part of the Christian life is endeavoring to realize just how corrupt our hearts actually are.

Recall the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). The Pharisee is a perfect example of "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." He fools himself into thinking that, between himself and the publican, he is the good, upright one. He stands before the Temple, lifting his eyes toward heaven, taking a pious position as close as he can to the altar, thanking God that he was so much better than the wretched publican. Yet, Jesus informs us that the publican, not the Pharisee, "went down to his house justified rather than the other" (verse 14). The Pharisee may have been righteous in his own eyes, but not in God's.

The publican—a lying, cheating tax collector—was humble enough to realize that his heart was, indeed, desperately wicked. He probably did not know the depths of the evil that he could do, but he knew that he was a sinner and not worthy of approaching God. He understood that, next to God, he was dirt and less than dirt. He merely beseeches God to show him mercy. The one who earned Jesus' respect is the person who recognized the evil within himself!

In [Jeremiah 17:9](#), God pulls no punches. The human heart—the seat of man's intellect, his emotions, his attitudes, his inclinations—is dishonest and evil. Most of us take evil far too lightly, especially the evil that is within us. We do not like to think of ourselves as evil. We always like to think that we are the guys in the white hats, the good guys. Everybody else has the problem. We tend to be quite quick to point the finger at others, all the while maintaining our own, lily-white innocence.

Such is the attitude that leads to sins like self-righteousness, pride, and sloth in overcoming and growing. This kind of self-justification can eventually manifest itself in *poneros*, active rebellion against God. If we reach the point where we think that we have nothing more to change or [repent](#) of, our growth will slow and soon stop altogether. Before long, our trajectory will be headed away from God because such an attitude is the exact opposite of what He is looking for in His children.

Our example of the Christian life is, of course, none other than Jesus Christ. We are Christians, His followers. To be a Christian is to live the life of Christ. Did He take evil lightly? A quick scan of [the Gospel](#) accounts will show that He encountered evil on a regular basis. He did not shrink from it, nor did He minimize it. He called it what it was and set His divine power against it, for that is the reason He came as a human being to this earth: to pay the price to conquer sin and [Satan](#) once and for all.

We have been called to follow His example of concentrating our power against the forces of evil, but our target is inward, staving off temptation, battling persistent sin, and clearing the field to produce good fruit in our lives. We will see more on this in Part Five.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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## From the Archives: Featured Sermon

### [Faith and the Christian Fight \(Part One\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The Bible abounds in metaphors of warfare, indicating that the Christian's walk will be characterized by stress, sacrifice, and deprivation, requiring awesome reservoirs of faith, exemplified by our forebears in Hebrews 11, influenced by a body of beliefs once delivered as a gift to the saints by hearing the Word of God. Our response to this gift should be to produce good works. Faith is the unseen support of that which is standing in full view, something that can subtly and swiftly drift away if not constantly attended with perseverance and steadfastness. The 'no works' doctrine is an

enemy to the building of faith. The examples given in Hebrews 11 provide patterns of productive Christian living, as well as how faith transcends the bounds of our physical lives. Living faith is differentiated from dead faith by an active yielding to God and keeping of His commandments (a demonstration of love). As Adam's and Eve's sin left all of us spiritually naked, Christ's sacrifice became the only adequate covering for our sins.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[Separation and Oneness With God](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Throughout the generations since Adam and Eve, war has been humanity's solution to problems between people, groups, and nations. Millions have died by the sword because sin drives people into conflict and denies them the means of reconciliation and harmony. Is there any hope for humanity? John Ritenbaugh gives the comforting answer: Oneness with God is possible through Jesus Christ!

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